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Sarah Brown: Victoria slaved in a gold mine aged 12 - your cash helped her to go to school

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OPINION

BY SARAH BROWN



The president of Theirworld and co-founder of aworldatschool.org says 57m children risk their health and lives working in treacherous conditions



Sport Relief

Philanthropist: Sarah Brown with Victoria

Victoria is 17 years old and has already spent three of her childhood years working in a crumbling Ghana gold mine.

Her father died when she was 12 and her mother had no choice but to send her to work to bring in money for the whole family to survive.

Victoria was just one of more than 10,000 children across the country involved in small scale, informal **gold mining** – known locally as 'galamsey'.

These children risk their health and lives carrying out back-breaking work in treacherous conditions simply to earn enough to eat.

Children in the mines risk pits collapsing on them and injury from dangerous tools and machinery.

In the long term they may have health problems caused by continued exposure to rock dust, skeletal damage due to transporting heavy loads and toxic poison from mercury used to bind the gold.

Children frequently get caught in lethal mudslides when it is raining because the soft ground makes the gold mining 'a bit easier'.

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Thanks to a Sport Relief grant to a local project run by Afrikids, Victoria has received emotional support and is now happily behind a desk at school.

As part of a Sport Relief focus on **International Women's Day** I visited Victoria and her friends in northern Ghana to see how money raised by the public helps to drive real change for women and young people to improve education and trade in Africa.

I had to travel for two days to reach Victoria's school where a lively debate was taking place between two teams arguing for and against the benefit of school exams – something I think we all have views on.

She and I headed to a quiet classroom – with blackboards, traditional schoolbooks and no electricity.

Victoria explained: "After my father passed away it was difficult getting food to eat and I wasn't able to attend school because I didn't have the things I needed such as a uniform or school books."



Lifeline: Victoria, 17, with mum Mmabom and Sarah Brown

So Afrikids made a small loan to Victoria's mum Nmabon who started a small business making a locally brewed drink.

With her earnings she can now feed the family and buy Victoria's school equipment. Now with each year of secondary school completed she also gets a goat – a vital asset.

With three goats she can afford to fulfil her dream of training to be a nurse – something she could barely imagine in her days working in the mines.

Afrikids have supported 548 children out of child labour and back to school, many with funds from Sports Relief collected from our caring and big-hearted British public.

It is so important that we give every child in the world the chance to go to school and learn. This is the gateway to learning life skills and future job skills, to a decent school lunch, to learning about good health and getting the right vaccinations, and the chance to dream of a better future.

Ghana is getting there, but we still have 57 million children around the world who miss out. Meeting Victoria and her mum showed me how a small contribution can make the biggest difference.

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In Kparagu a new school building is going up in the blazing sunshine. While they wait for it to be completed the headteacher is taking the class with a blackboard and rows of desks under a shady tree.

When the Ghana Education representative introduces me he asks the children, ranging from six to 12, who has heard of Britain. Total silence. He tries again. "Hands up who has heard of London."

Again, nothing. The same went for New York and Paris. It is a humbling moment for me that none of them have heard of the most famous places in the world.



I know reading and writing are more vital to their hopes and dreams but I dearly hope that one day they will learn about, and maybe even visit, some of the world's biggest cities.

- **Get involved at sportrelief.com . Sarah Brown is president of Theirworld and co-founder of aworldatschool.org , a digital initiative to get every child into school and learning by 2015.**

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